

The Obama factor: Responses in South Korea (2008-2009)

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Abstract

An analysis is made in this article of responses in the South Korean media to the rise of Barack Obama, starting with his appearance on the scene as presidential contender, then being nominated as the official candidate of the Democratic Party, then being elected to the office of President of the USA. At the outset the context is outlined of relations between South Korea and the USA. Then the opinions and attitudes of South Korean politicians, economists, editors, academics and letter writers from the general public at key moments during 2008 and 2009 in the American presidential election campaign are analysed. The focus is on expectations of Obama among the South Korean citizens mainly with regard to his economic policy and his policy on US foreign relations with South Korea. For the South Koreans Obama's stance towards North Korea on its development of a nuclear capability and the future of the foreign trade agreement between the USA and South Korea was crucial. The analysis in this article of the reactions to Obama's rise expressed in the South Korean newspapers confirms that globalisation and glocalisation are concurrent processes in the contemporary world. On the one hand a set of liberal moral values has become dominant among moderates all over the world that unites them in their attitudes towards global events. On the other hand those generic values only assume real significance for people when they are applied to local issues.

Keywords: Barack Obama; US presidential election 2008; South Korean newspapers; Foreign relations USA-ROK (Republic of Korea); KORUS FTA (Korea-United States Free Trade Agreement); Nuclear disarmament North Korea.

Introduction

Barack Obama, formerly a lawyer, constitutional law lecturer, Illinois State and United States (US) senator, became the 44th President of the United States of America (USA) at noon US East Standard Time on January 20, 2009. His inauguration followed a dream campaign. He had announced his candidacy for the presidency on February 10, 2007, emerged as a main challenger for the Democratic Party presidential candidacy in the course of 2007, secured the support of enough delegates to become his party's presumptive nominee on June 7, 2008 when Hillary Clinton formally ended her candidacy. Obama was duly nominated by the Democratic Party on August 27, 2008 as its candidate for the 2008 presidential elections. Obama won the presidential election against the Republican candidate, John McCain, on November 4, 2008 to become President-elect. His election was confirmed at the meeting of the Electoral College on December 15, 2008. The vote of the Electoral College was certified by the joint session of the US Congress on January 8, 2009 and he was declared to be the elected President of the United States. His inauguration, with the theme "A New Birth of Freedom", set an attendance record for any event in Washington, D.C., and marked the commencement of his four-year term in office.¹

The progressive growth in the support for Obama during the presidential election campaign can be ascribed partly to the disillusionment among US citizens with the Bush administration and partly to the public image of Obama as a fresh breeze in American politics. He was the first African-American to be nominated as a presidential candidate by one of the major parties. Although there were questions whether he was "black enough", he used his biracial background to his political advantage by rallying black support without alienating white voters. As a senator, he voted along Democratic Party lines and was rated as one of the most liberal senators. However, Obama's perceived combination of political savvy, calm and even temperament secured support for him even in more conservative circles.

Polls showed that not only in the USA, but also in countries around the globe, Obama received strong and increasing support in the run-up to his election and inauguration as President of the United States of America. In most countries people expected relations between the USA and the rest of

¹ See e.g. KT Walsh, "Barack Obama's inauguration is one for the history books", *U.S. News and World Report*, 20 January 2009. A video of the inauguration ceremony (available at <http://www.c-spanvideo.org/program/283479-1>, as accessed on 31 January 2013).

the world to improve in the case of a victory for Obama. Towards the end of the presidential election in 2008 support for Obama in countries on all continents was overwhelming, on average four times that of McCain, with the most favourable scores for Obama coming from Asian, European and a few African countries.²

It is the purpose of this article to focus on the reaction in South Korea to Obama's nomination by the Democratic Party as its presidential candidate, his election and inauguration as President of the USA. This is mainly a newspaper study, focusing on the South Korean media during the periods 3-15 June 2008 (when Obama secured the Democratic Party's presidential candidacy), 4-16 November 2008 (when he was elected President), and 20 January-1 February 2009 (after his inauguration as President), because these were the periods when the newspapers focused on Obama. Media coverage in South Korea, including editorials, regular columns, articles and reports, was analysed. Special attention was given to responses to Obama by politicians, economists, editors, academics and letter writers representing the general public. The main focus was on the expectations of Obama by South Korean citizens in terms of economic policy and foreign relations. Background information on the foreign relations context involving South Korea and the USA was obtained from a literature study.

Before Obama: South Korea's need for close ties with the USA

Good relations with the USA as superpower with enormous political and economic power have been of great importance to South Korea (the Republic of Korea, ROK). The USA developed special strategic relationships with this country during the Cold War period (1945-1989). At the heart of this special relationship was anticommunism.³

ROK-USA relations took the form of a formal security alliance in terms of the Mutual Defense Treaty (MDT), concluded between the two states after the Korean War (1950-1953). The USA agreed to help the ROK defend

2 "World citizens prefer Obama to McCain by more than 3-to-1", *Gallup World*, 28 October 2008 (available at <http://www.gallup.com/poll/111253/world-citizens-prefer-obama-mccain-more-than-3to1.aspx>, as accessed 27 October 2009).

3 See O Il-Whan, "Anticommunism and the national identity of Korea in the contemporary era: With a special focus on the USAMGIK and Syngman Rhee Government Periods", *The review of Korean studies*, 14, 3, September 2011, pp. 61-100.

itself against external aggression and maintained a strong military presence in South Korea. A Combined Forces Command (CFC) was established in 1978. During the Cold War anticommunism was the first priority of the South Korean government and it was in the country's interest to maintain and strengthen the alliance with the USA. Pro-alliance elites, backed by the most influential newspapers, dominated South Korean politics.⁴

Apart from anticommunism economic considerations was another key element of US relations with South Korea. South Korea's remarkable economic growth made the country a significant international player. Increased trade with the USA and foreign direct investment (FDI) by American business would further strengthen the ROK's economy and enhance its status as a major trading nation. Improved access to South Korea's expanding market and investment opportunities for American business would benefit the USA. Trade between the two countries steadily increased.⁵ The main commodities exported from South Korea to the USA after 2000 were machinery, motor cars, mineral fuel and oil, and iron and steel products and the main commodities exported from the USA to South Korea were machinery, optic and medical instruments, aircraft, oil and agricultural products (coarse grains, red meats, hides and skins, wheat and cotton).⁶

In the post-Cold War period democratisation brought political change to the ROK. These changes did not seriously threaten bilateral relations, but altered their nature as explained below.

After 32 years of military rule Kim Young-sam became South Korea's first civilian president in 1993. Democratisation in South Korea weakened rather than strengthened the USA-ROK alliance. Rising nationalism caused the new democratic elites to demand an autonomous, equal relationship with the USA regardless of the *de facto* power disparity between the two countries. During the presidencies of Kim Young-sam, Kim Dae-jung and Roh Moo-

4 US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs: Electronic Information and Publications Office, "Background notes, countries of the world: South Korea" (available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>, as accessed 30 March 2009). For the text of the MDT, see "Mutual Defense Treaty between the United States and the Republic of Korea, 1 October 1953", The Avalon Project, documents in law, history and diplomacy, Lillian Goldman Law Library, Yale Law School (available at http://avalon.law.yale.edu/20th_century/kor001.asp, as accessed 27 October 2009).

5 In 1989 the USA exported goods to the value of \$13.5 billion to and imported goods to the value of \$19.7 billion from South Korea. See US Foreign Trade Department statistics, "Trade with Korea, South: 1989" (available at <http://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5800.html#1989>, as accessed 6 October 2010).

6 Office of the United States Trade Representative, Executive Office of the President, "Korea" (available at <http://www.ustr.gov/countries-regions/japan-korea-apeec/korea>, as accessed 28 January 2013).

hyun differences surfaced from time to time between the USA and ROK over the latter's policies of engagement with North Korea (Democratic People's Republic of Korea, DPRK) and the US-South Korean alliance was showing signs of fraying (see next section). Old pro-alliance elites in South Korea managed to retain enough political clout to proscribe a radical shift in foreign policy away from the alliance. Pro-alliance views were supported by influential conservative newspapers such as *Chosun Ilbo*, *Donga Ilbo* and *JoongAng Daily*.⁷ In 2008, a year before Obama's inauguration as president, the pro-alliance Lee Myung-bak of the conservative GNP became president of South Korea. He pledged to repair the alliance with the USA and relations between Seoul and Washington were expected to improve.⁸

Despite intra-alliance friction on a diplomatic level USA-ROK trade continued to expand in the post-Cold War period. The USA became South Korea's second biggest trade partner after China. South Korea was the USA's seventh biggest trading partner. Trade between the USA and South Korea stood at \$84.7 billion in 2008.⁹

In 2006 the two countries started negotiating a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between them, which would lift tariffs, boost bilateral trade and investment and significantly increase both countries' GDPs.¹⁰ It was hoped that an FTA would help to shore up the US-South Korean alliance. After hard bargaining about various sensitive trade issues KORUS FTA (the Republic of Korea – United States Free Trade Agreement) was signed in June 2007. Being the USA's first FTA with a major Asian economy and by far the largest FTA concluded by South Korea it was the most significant agreement between the

7 DS Lee, "Democratization and the US-South Korean Alliance", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, p. 469.
8 The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, "South Korea country report: Outlook for 2008-2009", February 2008, p. 4.
9 M Gwang-lip, "Korus FTA hangs over the abyss", *JoongAng Daily*, 1 July 2009 (available at <http://joongangdaily.joins.com/article/view.asp?aid=2906805>, as accessed 27 October 2009); WH Cooper and ME Manyin, *The proposed South Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (KORUS FTA)*, Congressional Research Service (CRS) report for Congress, 23 January 2007, p. i (summary). For USA-South Korea trade statistics see Cooper and Manyin, p. 3; JJ Schott, "The Korea-US Free Trade Agreement: A summary assessment", Peterson Institute for International Economics, policy brief PB07-7, August 2007, p. 2.
10 USA, Office of the Executive President, Office of the United States Trade Representative, "Korea - U.S. Free Trade Agreement" (available at <http://www.ustr.gov/trade-agreements/free-trade-agreements/korus-fta>, as accessed 27 October 2009); B Klingner and D Markheim, "KORUS FTA strengthens the U.S. economy and alliance with Korea", The Heritage Foundation, WebMemo # 2485, 15 June 2009 (available at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/tradeandeconomicfreedom/wm2485.cfm>, as accessed 27 October 2009); M Gwang-lip, "Korus FTA hangs over the abyss", *JoongAng Daily*, 1 July 2009. See also KORUS FTA Resource Center home page (available at <http://www.keia.org/korus.php>, as accessed 27 October 2009).

two nations since 1953.¹¹ However, on both sides there were several obstacles to the ratification of the FTA and when Obama became president it still awaited formal approval by the US Congress and South Korea's National Assembly and there was no indication if and when it would be implemented. It seemed unlikely that KORUS FTA would revitalise the ailing USA-ROK alliance and reverse the trend of South Korea's expanding economic relations with the DPRK and China.¹²

Increasing anti-Americanism

The official foreign policy stance of the South Korean government of maintaining good relations with the USA disguised the fact that a variety of attitudes towards the USA existed among different sections of the population and that anti-Americanism was emerging.

In the 1980s anti-American sentiments started surfacing in South Korea. When about 2,000 civilians were killed or wounded by paratroopers in the Kwangju Massacre of 1980 and Chun Doo-hwan's military regime (1980-1987) was established, some South Korean intellectuals expressed the opinion that the USA supported the authoritarian regime for its own national interests.¹³ As a result of crimes committed by staff attached to the U.S. Forces Korea (USFK) anti-American xenophobia was intensified. The fairness of the U.S.-Korean Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) was questioned. The younger generation of South Koreans at that time had not experienced the Korean War and its aftermath and were less inclined to view the USA as their saviour from communism. Leftist ideology and emerging Korean nationalism, expressed in the form of *Juchesasang* (self-reliance) or "Kim Il-sungism", influenced that generation at a time that a process of democratisation was taking place in the ROK. A section of the South Korean media facilitated a surge of anti-

11 "South Korea – United States free trade agreement", *Wikipedia* (available at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S.-Korea_Free_Trade_Agreement, as accessed 27 October 2009).

12 M Gwang-lip, "Korus FTA hangs over the abyss", *JoongAng Daily*, 1 July 2009; DS Lee, "Democratization...", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, p. 490. See also Korean Alliance against KorUS FTA, "Stop KORUS FTA right now!", 22 October 2006 (available at <http://kctu.org/3270>, as accessed 27 October 2009).

13 For more details about the Kwangju massacre, see DM Plunk, "South Korea's Kwangju incident revisited", *Asian Studies*, Backgrounder No. 35, 16 September 1985; L Jai-Eui (ed.), *Gwangju Diary*, University of California, 1999; S Bok-jin, H Chong-gun, K Jun-tae, N Kyung-taek, K Nyung-man, K Myung-jin (eds), *May, The Triumph of Democracy*, May 18 Memorial Foundation, Gwangju, 2004; *History of the 5.18 Democratic Uprising*, The May 18 Memorial Foundation, Gwangju, 2008.

Americanism.¹⁴

In the post-Cold war period anti-American feelings in South Korea were aroused mainly by Washington's approach to the North Korean issue and, more recently, opposition to the KORUS FTA.

After the Korean War the nature of relations between the two Koreas was a crucial factor in USA-ROK relations. Korean nationalism played a significant role in this regard. For the more nationalistically inclined section of the South Korean population the reunification of Korea was an important goal. Nationalist elites emphasised the shared national identity of all Koreans, deemphasised the security threat from North Korea and advocated an unconditional engagement policy with the DPRK. These nationalists were suspicious of US foreign policy objectives and accused Washington of inflating the threat of North Korea to prevent inter-Korean reconciliation and reunification. In the periods when nationalistic leaders such as Presidents Rhee Syng-man and Park Chung-hee ruled tensions between South Korea and the United States increased.¹⁵

In the last twenty years official relations between South and North Korea have gone through a cycle of warming and cooling of relations. The US and South Korean governments have not always agreed on the nature of these relations.

The South-North Basic Agreement, which stated that the reunification of Korea was the goal of both the ROK and DPRK, was signed in 1991. After his election as the President of the ROK in 1997 Kim Dae-jung pursued a "Sunshine Policy" of engagement with the DPRK, comprising reconciliation and economic co-operation. It culminated in June 2000 in an inter-Korean summit between Kim Dae-jung and the North Korean leader, Kim Jong-il.¹⁶ Although the Clinton administration supported the "Sunshine Policy" there was a measure of resentment towards the "unrealistic" policies of the South Korean nationalist elites in some US government circles. In the new millennium the "Sunshine Policy" caused friction, because it was not compatible with the Bush administration's hardline "comprehensive

¹⁴ B-K Jhee, "Anti-Americanism and electoral politics in Korea", *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, No. 2, 2008, pp. 307-309.

¹⁵ DS Lee, "Democratization...", *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, pp. 480, 482.

¹⁶ US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs: Electronic Information and Publications Office, "Background notes, countries of the world: South Korea" (available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>, as accessed 30 March 2009).

approach” to North Korea. At the 2001 US-ROK summit Bush was critical of Seoul’s unconditional engagement policy, which his administration viewed as misguided “appeasement” and a betrayal of the alliance. President Kim Dae-jung’s response was to disapprove of Washington’s uncompromising posture toward Pyongyang.¹⁷

In the 2002 presidential election in the ROK Roh Moo-hyun, the Democratic Party (DP) candidate, defeated his more pro-American rival, Lee Hoi-chang of the Grand National Party (GNP). According to Jhee anti-American public perceptions marginally contributed to his electoral success, although Roh did not seek fundamental changes in the ROK-USA relationship in response to increasing anti-Americanism.¹⁸ After his election President Roh resorted to a pragmatic approach to USA-ROK relations. He did not deny the importance of the MDT and America’s military presence. On the contrary, his government officially objected to the reduction of the American military presence in South Korea. Roh expressed strong support for the war on terrorism and sent Korean troops to Iraq, stationing in that country the third-largest foreign armed force in support of the US occupation.¹⁹

Roh and Bush did not always see eye to eye on relations between the two Koreas. Like his predecessor Roh pursued a policy of reconciliation, called the “Peace and Prosperity Policy.” Korean reunification remained the long-term goal. Seoul’s engagement policy ran counter to the Bush administration’s hawkish stance towards North Korea.²⁰

From 2002 relations between North and South Korea became tense because of North Korea’s programme to enrich uranium for nuclear weapons. South Korean nationalists, still hoping to promote inter-Korean cooperation despite Pyongyang’s pursuit of nuclear weapons, openly expressed their displeasure when Bush referred to North Korea as part of “an axis of evil” and claimed that North Korea had become a victim of aggressive US policy. At meetings between Roh and Bush in 2003 and 2006 they reaffirmed their commitment to the bilateral alliance and agreed to follow a common approach toward the

17 DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, pp. 480-482; US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs: Electronic Information and Publications Office, “Background notes, countries of the world: South Korea (available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>, as accessed 30 March 2009).

18 B-K Jhee, “Anti-Americanism and ...”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, No. 2, 2008, pp. 314, 317, 318.

19 DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, pp. 483-485.

20 DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, pp. 480-482; US Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs: Electronic Information and Publications Office, “Background notes, countries of the world: South Korea (available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2800.htm>, as accessed 30 March 2009).

North Korean nuclear issue based on a “shared vision” for the future of the Korean Peninsula and Northeast Asia. Bush described the relationship between the USA and South Korea as a “strong and vital relationship”.²¹ However, it was common knowledge that ROK-USA interactions were uneasy. Although the ROK sought the elimination of the DPRK’s nuclear weapons through the so-called Six Party Talks (involving the USA, People’s Republic of China, ROK, Japan, Russia and DPRK) Roh was cautious not to link his policy toward North Korea too closely with demands for nuclear disarmament.

When Lee Myung-bak succeeded Roh in 2008 he pledged to implement a tougher policy towards North Korea. His preference was to continue engagement with the North, but to link Southern aid to nuclear compliance by the North, and to co-ordinate better with the US. This elicited a vitriolic response in North Korea, which put all official ties between the Koreas “on ice”. Despite Lee’s pro-American approach, his position on North Korea was not welcomed in the USA, because of Bush’s keenness to strike a nuclear deal with North Korea. After their meetings in April 2008 Bush and Lee pledged their commitment to resolve the North Korean issue through the six-party talks.²²

Although the KORUS FTA contained the promise of a massive boost to USA-ROK trade relations it also contributed to friction between the two countries. The reaction in both the USA and South Korea to the FTA ranged from bipartisan support to skepticism and even outright opposition. The demand for a revision of the auto clause by the American automotive industry was the biggest stumbling block for the Korus FTA. It was condemned by its South Korean opponents as favouring corporate profits over the good of people, especially the good of smaller-scale farmers and producers.²³ At his meetings with Bush in 2008 Lee Myung-bak agreed to partially lift the ban on US beef imports and thereby remove one of the main obstacles in the way of US ratification of the FTA. However, this sparked huge protests in

21 DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, pp. 483-5; S Mon-soon, “Northeast Asia and the ROK–U.S. Alliance: Why the Alliance is vital for the region and for the United States”, *American Foreign Policy Interests*, No. 30, 2008, p. 61; USA, Weekly compilation of presidential documents, Administration of George W Bush, 2006, p. 1602. Remarks following discussions with President Roh Moo-hyun of South Korea and an exchange with reporters, 14 September 2006.

22 The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, “South Korea country report: Outlook for 2008-2009”, Monthly Report February 2008, p. 4.

23 C Ahn, “Debunking five myths about the Korea-U.S. Free Trade Agreement”, The Oakland Institute fact sheet, 2007, p. 1.

the ROK.²⁴ Mounting opposition by South Korean farmers and civic groups put its ratification in doubt. A Korean Alliance against KORUS FTA was formed. Because the FTA would create not only winners who would benefit from it, but also losers (e.g. South Korean farmers) whose interests would be adversely affected, it stimulated anti-American sentiments among a section of the South Korean population.²⁵

Despite the strong alliance between the USA and South Korea during the Cold War, anti-American sentiments have openly surfaced in specific circles in South Korea over the last years. There is a group of radical nationalists in South Korea who harbour strong anti-American sentiments and who have engaged in emotional public protests against alleged US violations of the sovereign rights of the ROK. They have burnt American flags and attempted to bring down the statue of General Douglas MacArthur, which they regard as a “symbol of foreign occupation”, contrary to Korean conservatives’ view of MacArthur as the saviour of the ROK from communist invasion.²⁶

Thus, in South Korea anti-Americanism has existed in significant sections of the population. A survey conducted in 2002 found that in South Korea 53.0 percent of the respondents held favourable attitudes towards the USA and 44.2 percent unfavourable attitudes. Of the 44 countries included in the survey South Korea ranked 7th in the index of unfavourable attitudes towards the USA.²⁷ During the Cold War South Korea was regarded as one of the most pro-USA countries in the world. The overriding perception of the USA among the South Korean population was that of saviour from communism. However, in the recent past negative sentiments towards the USA have increased in South Korea. The percentage of South Koreans holding predominantly unfavourable views of the USA rose from less than 15 percent in 1994 to 44 percent in 2002. This constitutes a remarkable change in public perceptions in less than a decade.²⁸

Anti-Americanism in South Korea was part of a broader pattern of anti-Americanism that reached a climax during the second term of the Bush

24 The Economist Intelligence Unit Limited, “South Korea country report: Outlook for 2008-2009” (February 2008), p. 4; “A year for economic heartache”, *JoongAng Daily*, 31 December 2008.

25 M Gwang-lip, “Korus FTA hangs over the abyss”, *JoongAng Daily*, July 1, 2009; DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, p. 490. See also Korean Alliance against KorUS FTA, “Stop KORUS FTA right now!”, 22 October 2006 (available at <http://kctu.org/3270>, as accessed 27 October 2009).

26 DS Lee, “Democratization...”, *Journal of East Asian Studies*, 7, 2007, p. 482.

27 B-K Jhee, Pew global attitudes survey, 2002, p. 306.

28 B-K Jhee, “Anti-Americanism and ...”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, No. 2, 2008, pp. 305, 307.

administration. It was reported in 2005 by the Pew Global Attitudes Project Survey that anti-Americanism was “deeper and broader now than at any time in modern history.”²⁹ Strong anti-Bush sentiments did not necessarily seriously imperil the traditionally strong USA-ROK relations. Jhee argues that anti-Americanism should be viewed as an expression of “democratic maturity” and that increasing anti-Americanism will not lead to fundamental changes in the traditionally pro-American foreign policy of the ROK.³⁰

South Korean expectations of improved international relations under Barack Obama

Most South Koreans joined the rest of the world in hailing Obama’s ascendancy as a moment of hope for positive change in the world. In this article responses to Obama in the country, as reflected in the media, are analysed in terms of perceptions about his role in international, regional and bilateral (i.e USA-ROK) relations.

During the whole nomination and election process in the USA strong anti-Bush sentiments were expressed in the media in the ROK. Newspapers reflected a sense of relief among the majority of citizens that the rule of Bush was finally nearing its end. There did not seem to be any praise for Bush. He was accused of “folly” and “expediency” and his eight-year term described as a “nightmare”, mainly because of the USA’s military adventures in Afghanistan and Iraq. Disapproval was expressed of American arrogance under Bush, who divided the world according to America’s standard of good and evil and attempted to force America’s will onto other countries. It was stated that the Bush era was marked by the US pursuit of global hegemony based on military superiority and self-righteous ideology. Furthermore it was noted that the Bush administration had unsuccessfully tried to fight one fundamentalism with another fundamentalism, thereby plunging the USA and the rest of the world into unnecessary insecurity. Newspapers agreed that because of the blunders of Bush, especially the war in Iraq, the image of the USA abroad was at an all-time low. Bush was also blamed for having allowed conditions to develop that plunged the USA and the whole world into an economic crisis. Obama’s election was interpreted by those strongly opposed to Bush and his

29 B-K Jhee, “Anti-Americanism and ...”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, No. 2, 2008, p. 301.

30 B-K Jhee, “Anti-Americanism and ...”, *Political Science Quarterly*, 123, No. 2, 2008, p. 317.

policies as a judgement on the eight years of the Bush administration.³¹

In contrast to the generally harsh assessment of the Bush administration strong pro-Obama sentiments dominated coverage of the election campaign. After Bush's two terms there was a perception that the time was ripe for change. Obama fought his nomination and election campaigns on a ticket of change. Unsurprisingly "change" was the buzz word most often associated with Obama in the media. He was portrayed as a symbol and personification of change. When he was nominated as presidential candidate the possibility of Obama becoming president was regarded as a prospect harbouring hope for welcome change from the staleness of the Bush presidency, that would be good for America and the world. When he won the presidential election it was stated that the mere fact of his election had already made the world a better place and reversed the trend of anti-Americanism. Obama's image as a citizen of the world would improve the USA's international relations. His election had also changed the global geopolitical game, because it would no longer be possible for other powers to hide their belligerence behind America's unpopularity.³²

Expectations were that Obama's election would not change only the United States, but the whole world. There was agreement among commentators in South Korea that Obama's nomination and election heralded a "brave new world". He was regarded as a visionary leader who could guide the USA and the world into a more humane and prosperous era of global peace.³³ Hope was expressed in the media that under his leadership the USA would be less self-centred and arrogant, and would realise that in the 21st century, with the myriad social, economic and environmental challenges facing the planet, the future of the USA was inextricably linked to the rest of the world. It was hoped that Obama would lead the USA away from the unilateralism of the Bush administration and back to respect for the role of the United Nations.³⁴

In South Korean newspapers Obama was compared to great leaders of the past. A professor of history wrote that Obama's spirit, expressed in his "Yes

31 See e.g. "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "A New Beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

32 See e.g. "Good luck, President Obama", *Joongang Daily*, 21 January 2009.

33 "New US leader: First black president should exemplify spirit of age", *The Korea Times*, 5 November 2008; "Rebirth of America: New leader calls for sense of responsibility, sacrifice", *The Korea Times*, 21 January 2009.

34 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "High expectations" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 6 November 2008; "A new beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

we can” slogan, was similar to that of the founding fathers, frontier explorers, immigrants, and John F Kennedy. Despite his shortcomings, such as scant diplomatic and administrative experience, Obama was a new-style leader who offered hope. He possessed the intellect and passion necessary to address the onerous tasks facing the USA and the world.³⁵

When the Obama campaign was gathering momentum, building up to fever-pitch, occasional warnings against unrealistically high expectations of Obama and “o-phoria” were sounded in the media. Editors acknowledged that Obama possessed the leadership qualities to overcome the global economic, political and environmental problems, but pointed out that he was only human and that there were many obstacles which would make it difficult for him to meet the impossibly high expectations of him that had been created. It was expected that his honeymoon would be over before it could even begin.³⁶

Obama’s ability to change the world was directly linked to American power. Editorial comments made it clear that there was a range of opinions among the South Korean media staff on exactly what America’s role in global affairs should be. Some editors emphasised that the USA would remain the world’s most powerful nation for a significant length of time and expressed the hope that Obama would restore America’s leadership in global affairs.³⁷ Others were of the opinion that America’s global leadership was coming to an end and that a global shift was taking place as a result of a re-emergence of Asian power. Economic power was already multipolar, with the USA, Europe, Japan and China as the major players. The global political map would be redrawn by the way in which Obama handled the competition for global hegemony.³⁸

Editors and political analysts in South Korea identified priorities for Obama’s agenda. They accepted that Obama’s first loyalty would be to the USA and his first priority to try and save the American economy. Most South Korean editors agreed that economic recovery could be achieved only through global cooperation and not by unilateral US action. The USA would have to mobilise

35 K Kyu-hyung (Professor of History, Myongji University), “Obama’s past, present and future”, *The Chosun Ilbo*, 5 November 2008.

36 “Rebirth of America: New leader calls for sense of responsibility, sacrifice”, *The Korea Times*, 21 January 2009.

37 “A new beginning for America” (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

38 “New US leader: First black president should exemplify spirit of age”, *The Korea Times*, 5 November 2008.

international coalitions to address shared threats and challenges.³⁹

In foreign policy it would be Obama's task to change the bellicose image of the USA, to restore respect for the USA as a guardian of freedom and human rights, and to switch to "a flexible form of diplomacy that utilizes both the dynamics of alliances and soft power". It was expected of him to continue Bush's anti-terrorism strategy, but to endeavour to achieve peace in Iraq and withdraw American troops as quickly as possible. The military campaign in Afghanistan needed to be intensified. The Israeli-Palestinian crisis in Gaza as well as the North Korean and Iranian nuclear issues had to be resolved. It was not expected that Obama would be able in the short-term to resolve the intractable issues of the Middle East and it was not quite clear how he would respond to the changing roles of China and Russia in world affairs. Obama was advised, in his efforts to resolve these issues, to resort to dialogue and cooperation with both the allies and adversaries of the USA.⁴⁰

In terms of environmental policies it was hoped that Obama would attend to climate change and lead the development of alternative energy. He would have to invest into enhancing the energy efficiency of existing fuel and developing renewable types of energy, such as wind, solar and geothermal resources.⁴¹

Thus an overriding sense was expressed in the South Korean media that Obama's rise to the most powerful office in the world was a momentous occasion that would have an impact on the entire world. Although Obama himself cautioned that global change could not be effected overnight, there was, nevertheless, a sense of optimism about the prospects of positive change.

Anti-American groups, including extremist minorities, did not necessarily share the euphoria about Obama's election and the prospects for a better world so boldly expressed in the media and shared by the majority of the

39 "New US leader: First black president should exemplify spirit of age", *The Korean Times*, 5 November 2008; "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; K Kyu-hyung (Professor of History, Myongji University), "Obama's past, present and future", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 5 November 2008; "High expectations" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 6 November 2008; "A new beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

40 "New US leader: First black president should exemplify spirit of age", *The Korean Times*, 5 November 2008; "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "A new beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009; "Good luck, President Obama" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 21 January 2009; "Rebirth of America: New leader calls for sense of responsibility, sacrifice", *The Korea Times*, 21 January 2009.

41 K Kyu-hyung (Professor of History, Myongji University), "Obama's past, present and future", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 5 November 2008; "Good luck, President Obama" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 21 January 2009; "Old growth strategy: Seoul's green new deal 'green' in name only", *The Korea Times*, 30 January 2009.

population.

Regional considerations in South Korea

As far as Obama's potential role in regional affairs was concerned the South Korean media had a narrow focus on the Korean Peninsula rather than the entire East Asia. A greater role for East Asia in the world was propagated. There was consensus that Asia should reclaim its historical share in international affairs.⁴² When Obama assumed office it was not quite clear in which direction his administration's policy on East Asia would develop. South Korean editors were not sure what he meant when he said that he would work to ensure that China plays by international rules.⁴³

The North Korean nuclear issue, around which the future of the alliance between the ROK and the USA revolved, was the major focus of South Koreans in their assessment of Obama's potential role in regional affairs. At the time of the American presidential elections Lee Myung-bak's government, responding to a Korean public mostly opposed to a policy of confrontation with Pyongyang, was not in favour of a return to the restrictive policies towards North Korea of the early years of the Bush Administration, but strongly supported the six-party talks with North Korea and also sought direct Seoul-Pyongyang dialogue.⁴⁴

During the election campaign, especially in its early stages, there was some scepticism in the South Korean media about Obama's attitude towards the Korean peninsula. His commitment to the ROK-USA alliance and the US military presence in South Korea was questioned and it was mentioned that his position on North Korea was more conciliatory than that of Senator McCain.⁴⁵ Reference was made of Obama's lack of experience in foreign affairs in general and in matters of the Korean peninsula in particular.⁴⁶

42 "Swiftly adapting to America's transformation" (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 4 November 2008; J Nye (former U.S. assistant secretary of defense), "Barack Obama and American power", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008.

43 "Obama and Korea" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 20 January 2009.

44 L Gordon Flake, "Obama and U.S.-ROK relations", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 16 June 2008.

45 "Obama and McCain" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 7 June 2008; "Obama effect" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 11 November 2008.

46 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008.

There was no doubt that an election victory for Obama would lead to a change in the US policy regarding the Korean peninsula. It was clear that, in dealing with North Korea, Obama would be more flexible than the Bush administration, which demanded a complete, verifiable and irreversible elimination of the North Korean nuclear programme.⁴⁷ During his election campaign Obama, as part of his foreign policy approach in favour of directly engaging in negotiations even with countries and leaders with whom the USA did not agree, made it clear that he wished to improve US relations with North Korea. He expressed himself in favour of direct dialogue with North Korea and of meeting Kim Jong-il, the North Korean leader.⁴⁸ Officials in the Obama camp mentioned the possibility of establishing formal diplomatic relations with North Korea.⁴⁹ In response the chief of the American section of the North Korean Foreign Ministry, Ri Gun, met the head of Obama's Korea policy team, Frank Jannuzi, and Sung Kim, the US special envoy on North Korean affairs.⁵⁰

Obama's direct dialogue approach was going to be a diplomatic challenge for both Koreas. It was received with mixed feelings in South Korea. It caused some concern among conservatives, because direct Washington-Pyongyang talks could block Seoul-Pyongyang dialogue, could lead to North Korean demands for more concessions from the USA, and could be exploited by left wing politicians in South Korea to argue that the ruling GNP was unable to counter North Korea's strategy of isolating South Korea.⁵¹

However, President Lee chose not to reject Obama's position. In an interview he stated that he was not opposed to a summit between Obama and Kim Jong-il if it could help to denuclearise North Korea. He believed that Obama would value the views of Seoul and that the two allies would consult over the inter-Korean issue.⁵² Lee's stance was supported by most political commentators in the South Korean media, especially the editors of pro-government newspapers, who welcomed the idea of direct Washington-

47 "Korea's new challenges to be solved in Obama administration" (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 5 November 2008; "Obama and the peninsula" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 6 November 2008.

48 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "Obama and the peninsula" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 6 November 2008.

49 "Obama's N. Korea policy will need the South" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008.

50 "N. Korea should not misread the new U.S. administration" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 10 November 2008.

51 "Obama and the peninsula" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 6 November 2008; "Obama's N. Korea policy will need the South" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008; "Obama-Kim summit: Pyongyang should give up bid to sideline Seoul", *The Korea Times*, 11 November 2008.

52 "Obama-Kim Summit: Pyongyang should give up bid to sideline Seoul", *The Korea Times*, 11 November 2008; "N Korea will need the South soon enough" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 11 November 2008.

Pyongyang dialogue as a move that could stimulate North Korea to open up, while it did not necessarily constitute a threat to South Korea's role in negotiations about the future of the peninsula.⁵³

Editors of pro-opposition newspapers also welcomed Obama's move away from Bush's confrontational approach to leaders of countries regarded as the "axis of evil" as an option more likely to produce a breakthrough in efforts to peacefully resolve the nuclear standoff with Pyongyang. However, they were sceptical about the Lee administration's North Korea policy, which was blamed for the marginalisation of Seoul in regional diplomacy. They appealed to the government to solidify the ROK-USA alliance and to take advantage of the change in US political power to regain lost diplomatic leverage.⁵⁴

The consensus was that Obama was not deviating from the US foreign policy principles of the prevention of nuclear proliferation and the complete abolition of the North Korean nuclear programme, but was only using a different method to achieve them. Flexible but decisive action was expected of Obama. In the foreign policy section of his campaign website a call was made for a crackdown on nuclear proliferation by strengthening the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty so that a country like North Korea, that was breaking the rules, would automatically face strong international sanctions. Obama had warned during the election campaign that if North Korea rejected thorough nuclear verification Washington would have no choice but to stop energy aid, re-impose sanctions and consider a new set of restrictions. Direct dialogue between Obama and Kim would succeed only if Pyongyang could convince the Obama administration that it was indeed abolishing its nuclear programme and weapons. It was expected that, once in the White House, Obama would be willing to deal severely with provocation by North Korea.⁵⁵

In the media mention was made of the mistakes made in 1993 by the newly inaugurated administrations in Seoul and Washington when North Korea

53 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "Obama's N. Korea policy will need the South" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008.

54 "Historic US elections: Seoul needs to prepare for various scenarios", *The Korea Times*, 5 June 2008; "Obama and the peninsula" (editorial), *JoongAng Daily*, 6 November 2008; "Odd man out: Seoul should hurry to restore lost diplomatic leverage", *The Korea Times*, 7 November 2008; "Obama-Kim summit: Pyongyang should give up bid to sideline Seoul", *The Korea Times*, 11 November 2008; "N.K. policy review" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 13 November 2008.

55 "N. Korea should not misread the new U.S. administration" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 10 November 2008; Kang Chun-suk, "N. Korea on the rampage" (column), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 14 November 2008; "Obama should warn N. Korea against crossing the line" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 14 November 2008.

withdrew from the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.⁵⁶ Appeals were made to the Lee government not to lose confidence that South Korea's cooperation was the key to resolving the North Korean nuclear issue. It should be proactive by working hard on its cooperation with the incoming US administration and by comprehensively reviewing the ROK-USA alliance and Seoul's role in the six-party talks.⁵⁷

In the face of widespread criticism Obama was forced to backtrack with regard to the idea of a summit with the North Korean government. He made it clear that it was not his intention to sideline Seoul. He was in favour of cooperative diplomacy, by which the USA could resolve problems together with friends. He stated that a joint vision had to be worked out with South Korea in order to deal with regional challenges.⁵⁸ In a congratulatory message after Obama's election President Lee Myung-bak referred to the strength of the strategic alliance between the ROK and the USA. Obama, well aware that for South Korea the complete scrapping of North Korea's nuclear programme was the sole option, stated that there should be no concessions with regard to denuclearising the Korean Peninsula. He promised Lee to closely cooperate with South Korea to try and achieve the nuclear disarmament of North Korea. Arrangements were made for Lee to meet key officials in the Obama camp to discuss policies involving Asia and the Korean peninsula. This was regarded as the start of policy coordination between the two governments.⁵⁹

For South Koreans it was an absolute priority to live in peace with North Korea, free from a nuclear threat. Fears that the North Korean nuclear issue would be pushed down the order of priorities for the incoming US administration by other issues, such as the global financial crisis and the problems in the Middle East, Afghanistan and Iran, was understandable.⁶⁰ When Obama was inaugurated the South Korean media reflected the desire of the population that in his term a peninsula peace structure could be negotiated.⁶¹

56 "A new beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

57 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; "Obama's N. Korea policy will need the South" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008; "N. Korea will need the South soon enough" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 11 November 2008.

58 "Can Obama fulfill his promise of change while the world watches?" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 6 November 2008; K Chun-suk, "N. Korea on the rampage" (column), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 14 November 2008.

59 "Obama's N. Korea policy will need the South" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, November 7, 2008.

60 K Chun-suk, "N. Korea on the rampage" (column), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 14 November 2008.

61 "Audacity of hope on Obama's Korea-U.S. alliance" (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 20 January 2009.

US-ROK bilateral relations

At the start of the presidential election campaign in the USA some observers of Korean-American relations, remembering the inability of Kim Dae-jung and George W. Bush to see eye to eye, wondered in the light of the fact that President Lee Myung-bak was heading a conservative GNP government whether the election of a Democrat in the USA might result in a renewed misalignment in ROK-USA relations because of ideological differences.⁶²

Opposing views with regard to the two candidates existed in the South Korean media. Newspapers supporting the conservative GNP government seemed to prefer McCain's economic and foreign policies as being more favourable towards the ROK, whereas papers supporting the more liberal opposition parties were inclined to take a pro-Obama line. In mid-2008 views expressed in the media were rather tentative, because editors realised that the policies of the contenders were bound to change during the campaign.⁶³ As the election process progressed it was pointed out that there were only minor differences between the two candidates' policies regarding the ROK. Therefore there was no great anxiety in Seoul about the outcome of the election.⁶⁴

When it became clear that Obama was going to win the election the South Korean media seemed to be cautiously optimistic about the prospects of an Obama presidency. On the one hand no dramatic change to the existing good relations between the USA and ROK was expected, but on the other hand it was realised that there would inevitably be subtle changes in foreign policy under a new US administration, which would have a profound impact on the Korean Peninsula. The editor of the *Korea Herald* reminded readers of former president Kim Dae-jung's disastrous first encounter with George W. Bush and warned Seoul officials not to be complacent and indifferent to the US election results. President Lee Myung-bak's government was called upon to watch political trends in the USA closely, to make preparations for possible changes in US foreign policy and to start forging ties with the new leadership in Washington.⁶⁵

62 L Gordon Flake, "Obama and U.S.-ROK relations", *The Chosun Ilbo*, 16 June 2008.

63 "Obama and McCain" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 7 June 2008.

64 "Election in America" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 4 November 2008.

65 "Historic US elections: Seoul needs to prepare for various scenarios" (editorial), *The Korea Times*, 5 June 2008; "Swiftly adapting to America's transformation" (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 4 November 2008; "Election in America" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 4 November 2008.

Obama regarded South Korea as one of the USA's "closest allies and greatest friends". After his election in November 2008 Obama phoned Lee, who was one of only nine leaders around the world to be honoured by a personal call from the president-elect. This was regarded as proof of the importance Obama attached to ROK-USA relations. In a friendly telephone conversation both leaders stressed the importance of the alliance of more than fifty years between their countries and agreed to meet as soon as possible. Obama committed himself to strengthening the alliance between the USA and the ROK, which he regarded as a cornerstone of peace and stability in Asia, and promised to closely cooperate with South Korea. His words were interpreted as an expression of his hope that Seoul would play a positive role in Asia.⁶⁶

Obama's wish, expressed in the Obama-Biden Plan, to build a new type of relationship with the ROK and other countries in the region that would go beyond bilateral agreements, occasional summits and ad hoc agreements was welcomed in the South Korean media. Because there were no insurmountable obstacles to forging a new partnership it was hoped that South Korea and the USA would be able to upgrade their alliance. Despite ideological differences it would be possible for the conservative Lee administration to find a modus operandi with the liberal Obama administration. Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan stated that the ROK was working on a "forward-looking" declaration of the ROK-USA alliance and would consult with Washington on the future of the alliance. It was realised that Obama's first priority would be to attend to policies designed to revitalise the US economy and that actions to bring the USA closer to its allies would have to be postponed. The first meeting between presidents Lee and Obama was scheduled for April 2009 in London during the G20 conference on the global financial crisis.⁶⁷

For USA-Korea relations the Obama era was accompanied by both hope and risk. At the time of Obama's inauguration concern was expressed by the *Chosun Ilbo's* correspondent in Washington that the ROK-USA alliance was weakening. Both Condoleezza Rice, Bush's secretary of state, and Hillary Clinton, Obama's secretary of state-designate, had shown preference for the USA's "alliance" with Japan over its "partnership" with South Korea. It was regarded as disturbing evidence of Seoul's loss of credibility in the USA that South Korea was regarded as a mere partner rather than a sworn ally. The

⁶⁶ "Odd man out: Seoul should hurry to restore lost diplomatic leverage", *The Korea Times*, 7 November 2008; "Cooperation and trust" (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 8 November 2008; "Auto trade with U.S." (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 11 November 2008.

⁶⁷ "Obama and Korea" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 20 January 2009.

agreement at Camp David in April 2008 to upgrade the ROK-USA relationship to a “21st century strategic partnership”, after the strained relations during the Roh Moo-hyun administration, had not been acted upon and seemed to be mere rhetoric. An appeal was made to the South Korean government to guard against neglecting the ROK-USA alliance.⁶⁸ There was the possibility, according to the *Mail Business News*, that the Obama administration would focus on Japan and China in the Asian region and that USA-Korean relations would receive less attention. Special efforts from the Korean side would be required to stay on the radar of US foreign policy.⁶⁹

At the time of Obama’s election and inauguration the first major issue that dominated relations between Washington and Seoul was the USA’s policy toward North Korea and particularly the North Korean nuclear issue, which was discussed in the previous section. The second major bilateral issue, the pending KORUS FTA and trade relations between the two countries, is discussed here.

As far as the KORUS FTA was concerned, there was during the presidential election campaign much scepticism among South Koreans about how Obama’s economic views would impact on US-Korean trade relations. It was noted that the USA had a long history of protectionist trade policies and that the Democratic Party was more pro-protectionist than the Republican Party. The Federation of Korean Industries expressed concern in a report that trade-protectionism of the steel, textile, and other industries was anticipated in the event of a Democratic Party victory in the presidential election. The Korean economy would be hard hit when the USA, the biggest market in the world, implemented protectionist policies on Korean products.⁷⁰

During the campaign Obama described the KORUS FTA as being “badly flawed” and stated that it was unfair that South Korea exported 700,000 cars a year to the USA and imported only 5,000 American cars. He was in favour of the revision of the FTA. South Korean newspapers regarded Obama’s statement as a strategic comment aimed to win support from the labour unions in the automobile industry. In the South Korean media the imbalance in the car trade was attributed to the failure of the US automotive industry to meet the needs of Korean consumers. It could be offset by promoting the sale of American beef in South Korea. Warnings were sounded that a renegotiated

68 L Ha-won, Korea-U.S. alliance needs constant care” (column), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 20 January 2009.

69 “Audacity of hope on Obama’s Korea-U.S. alliance” (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 20 January 2009.

70 “Obama’s protectionism” (opinion), *The Dong-a Ilbo*, 3 June 2008.

FTA that was less than favourable to South Korea could boost anti-American sentiments in the country.⁷¹ Hope was expressed that the KORUS FTA could achieve a “win-win situation via free and fair trade”.⁷²

In the National Assembly the ruling Grand National Party (GNP) was in favour of a prompt ratification of the KORUS FTA in an effort to lessen the pressure on renegotiation. However, the Democratic Party (DP) and other opposition parties, backed by former president Roh Moo-hyun and his last foreign minister Song Min-soon, blocked the FTA’s passage, because they believed that ratification by the ROK and non-ratification by the USA under an Obama administration might cause conflict between the two states and limit Seoul’s room for manoeuvre. Following party lines some South Korean newspaper editors were in favour of and others opposed to early ratification.⁷³

Obama’s leaning towards protectionism to prevent job losses in the American auto industry was sharply criticised in the South Korean newspapers. Editors reminded their readers of the Korean foreign exchange crisis in 1997 as a result of US trade protection measures and expressed concern that protectionism might once again endanger the spirit of the Korea-US alliance.⁷⁴ They argued that the global economic crisis was not caused by free trade and could not be solved by protectionism. Although it was acknowledged that it was natural for Obama to prioritise US interests appeals were made to him to encourage global cooperation rather than to focus only on US short-term national interests. By doing so ways could be found for America and the world to prosper together.⁷⁵

When Obama was elected the South Korean media started focussing on what his economic policy would be and what effect it would have on the ROK. It was expected that “Obamanomics” would mean “big government”. Because the deregulation of the Bush administration was blamed for the financial crisis, it was expected that Obama would tighten screening and supervision

71 “Obama and the Korea-U.S. FTA”, *The Dong-a Ilbo*, 7 November 2008; “Obama is wrong about trade with Korea” (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 7 November 2008.

72 “Audacity of hope on Obama’s Korea-U.S. alliance” (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 20 January 2009.

73 “Korea’s new challenges to be solved in Obama administration” (editorial), *Mail Business News*, 5 November 2008; “Obamanomics or MB-nomics? Government must not go against global economic stream” (editorial), *The Korea Times*, 7 November 2008; “Free trade ruckus: Parties should find targets not inside but outside” (editorial), *The Korea Times*, 10 November 2008; “Is this the right time to ratify the FTA?” (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 11 November 2008; “Roh should keep out of the FTA debate” (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 12 November 2008.

74 “Dangers of protectionism” (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 12 November 2008.

75 “Good luck, President Obama” (editorial), *Joongang Daily*, 21 January 2009.

of financial institutions and increase government intervention in the market. It was hoped that he would be successful in turning around the sagging US economy, which would benefit the global economy.⁷⁶

However, at the time of his election and inauguration there were still fears in the ROK that Obama's protectionist stance might trigger trade conflict and worsen the global recession. These fears were exacerbated when his Korean issues advisor, Frank Januzzi, and his nominated Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, repeated the earlier call for a renegotiation of the KORUS FTA to protect the American auto industry.⁷⁷ Criticism of Obama's view that KORUS FTA should be revised before ratification was expressed in those South Korean newspapers that supported the GNP government's demand that it should be ratified without any alteration.⁷⁸

Conclusion

The analysis of responses in South Korea to Barack Obama's ascendance to the American presidency is revealing of the impact of contemporary globalising processes and underlines some of the findings of the study of globalisation.

On the one hand it is remarkable that among elites in South Korea the fundamental moral response to major international events seems to be very similar to that in many other countries. We have done a study of responses to Obama in South Africa as well, and although South Korea and South Africa are located in regions and spheres of influence which are very far apart, with populations that are culturally very different, the anti-Bush and pro-Obama sentiments expressed in the media in the two countries agree to such an extent that they are totally interchangeable. Globalisation has caused such a convergence of liberal democratic values, associated with post-Cold War political culture, that media coverage provides evidence of remarkable homogenisation of thinking across cultures.⁷⁹ The international media, as part of global information networks, has played a crucial role in this regard. Editors, political analysts and commentators seem to speak exactly the same

76 "Obamanomics" (opinion), *The Dong-a Ilbo*, 7 November 2008.

77 "Auto trade with U.S." (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 11 November 2008; "A new beginning for America" (editorial), *The Chosun Ilbo*, 21 January 2009.

78 "Obama and Korea" (editorial), *The Korea Herald*, 20 January 2009. The KORUS FTA has subsequently been revised and entered into force as the U.S.-Korea Free Trade Agreement on 15 March 2012.

79 The perception of the emergence of one homogenised culture as global extension of Western culture is discussed by John Tomlinson, "Globalised culture: The triumph of the West?", *Culture and global change*, T Skelton and T Allen (eds) (London, Routledge, 1999).

language, an easily discernable type of global speak. This homogenisation, of course, is restricted to the moderate sections of populations represented by the mainstream media. In both countries fringe groups of religious fundamentalists, nationalist extremists and anticapitalists exist, who do not subscribe to the majority viewpoint.

On the other hand it is evident from the way in which the media in South Korea reflected the expectations of Obama in local communities, that events of global import are clearly linked to the hopes of local people. In the first instance the writers of reports, editorials and columns are assessing events on the global stage in terms of their significance and relevance for the local audience. To the same measure that responses in the media of the ROK and other countries converged with regard to the universal moral values inherent in the process of Obama's election, they diverged with regard to the application of what was happening in the USA to the local situation.

In South Korea the media spotlight was on how the position of the country could be consolidated when Obama became president of the USA. In their response to Obama's nomination and election the South Korean media focused above anything else on what impact his rise to power would have on inter-Korean relations and the KORUS FTA. This reflects the overriding concern for regional security and economic development among South Koreans. Nationalist aspirations for the reunification of Korea received more attention in right-wing newspapers, but lurked in the background in the mainstream media, because it is a long-term rather than an immediate ideal.

This linking in the media of a major global event to local aspirations and needs shows that globalisation and glocalisation are simultaneous processes in the contemporary world.⁸⁰ A set of moral values have emerged in the post-Cold War world to which the majority of moderate citizens in countries, that may be very far removed from one another in terms of location and culture, are prepared to subscribe. However, these generic values only assume real significance when they are made applicable to the local situation with its unique features.

⁸⁰ The idea that a globalising culture is essentially a hybrid culture receives attention in many post-1990 studies, e.g. B Ashcroft, *Post-colonial transformation* (London, Routledge, 2001); J Tomlinson, *Globalization and culture* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1999); RJ Lieber and RE Weisberg, "Globalization, culture, and identities in crisis", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 16, No. 2, Winter 2002; D Birch, "Transnational cultural studies: What price globalisation?", *Social Semiotics*, 10, No. 2, 2000. For an Asian perspective see S Ge, "Globalization and cultural difference: Thoughts on the situation of trans-cultural knowledge", *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 2(2), 2001 p. 261.